

***Community Convention & Development
Company***

Mid/South Armagh Youth Focus Group

15th October 2005

***'A Summary of Findings &
Recommendations'***

The Community Convention and Development Company Ltd

In March 2003, an ad-hoc group of politicians and community leaders, known as 'The Think Tank' met informally to discuss the state and future of local Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities (PUL). The reason we use this term is because the use of any one of these labels over simplifies the issue of interpreting the complexity of political and cultural identity in Northern Ireland and particularly in Protestant communities.

After a few months of discussion it was agreed it was imperative that a programme to 'Transform Loyalist Communities' should be developed. The analysis was based on the belief that whilst many issues of deprivation are common to disadvantaged communities across Northern Ireland, there were issues, experiences and dynamics that are particular and distinct to PUL communities. These issues express themselves, for example, around levels of educational underachievement, population decline / imbalance, paramilitarism, physical degeneration, alienation and stigmatisation governed by a sense of loss. The Think Tank believed mainstream Government programmes were failing to effectively address these problems and if transformation was to be achieved it would require a particular focus and special programmes.

The Convention Model

A number of the Think Tank members had been involved with the first Shankill Convention, a community based response to the devastating paramilitary feud. The Greater Shankill Community Convention, held in May/June 2002, was organised around a two-day exhibition emphasising community achievements, involving over eighty local interests, followed by two days of discussions around key local issues facing the community. The agenda was set by the community itself which reflected local ownership of the Convention.

The Shankill Convention succeeded in establishing a new sense of community confidence, a unity of purpose and a resolve to work together. It became a mechanism which the community could use to come together to address strategic issues such as, housing, unemployment and education.

The work begins

The Think Tank believed the process of transformation could be enhanced, in the first instance, by using the Convention model in other PUL communities and they successfully lobbied government for funding to run four pilot conventions across Northern Ireland, the first of which was a successful follow-up Convention held on the Shankill in September 2004. Also that month, the Community Convention and Development Company was formally established with a board representative of the different interests of the PUL community. A staff team and base was established in January 2005.

The aims of a Convention?

The aim of the Convention is:

- To encourage and reinforce individual and community confidence
- To improve relationships within disadvantaged Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities and with government
- To develop a positive vision for disadvantaged Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities
- To identify areas for action e.g. capacity building
- To lobby for policy change

The process of developing a community convention is underpinned by the values of inclusiveness and transparency.

Mid and South Armagh

The representatives of Protestant Unionist Loyalist Networking, keen to follow up on the work of previous focus groups, believed a Community Convention was a way forward for P/U/L communities in mid-south Armagh. A Community Convention would enable all sections of the P/U/L community in the area to come together, to identify their needs and to ascertain what they need to do together and on what issues they need to challenge Government and public sector bodies.

The Protestant Unionist Loyalist Networking (P/UL Networking) have agreed to act as a co-ordinating body for the Mid-South Armagh Convention with the support of the Community Convention and Development Company Limited (CC&DCL) staff team. However, the P/U/L Networking and CC&DCL want to include more local people in the preparations until a fully representative Local Area Committee can be established to oversee the Convention and the implementation of its recommendations.

In the interim and as a result of a series of meetings with P/U/L Networking and CC&DCL it was also recommended that a number of focus groups be conducted in order to get as many local people as possible involved in the planning and preparations not only of the focus groups but the Convention itself in order to ensure everyone's voice is heard.

It is with the latter in mind and following meetings between P/U/L Networking and CC&DCL it was agreed that four focus groups should be organised as soon as possible, these focus groups are to be developed around:

- Youth
- Women
- Men
- Churches

Youth Focus Group

The Youth Focus Group, the first focus group to be held in the area, took place on 15th October 2005 in the Armagh City Hotel and was attended by some 13 young people aged between 14-25 years from Killylea, Tynan, Middletown and Keady, all areas of County Armagh.

The focus group was partly co-ordinated and facilitated by REACT, (Reconciliation, Education, And Community Training), a community based organisation in Armagh City, covering the Mid Ulster area, with the aim of supporting marginalized groups and individuals through a range of projects. The focus of their work is to empower communities, develop skills and promote reconciliation through community development, education and training. As REACT has a specialist Youth Development Officer and dedicated Youth Development Project, aimed at all young people aged between 4 to 16 years old, they were ideally placed to facilitate the youth focus group, supported by a Development Officer from CC&DCL.

The focus group ran from 10 am to 3 pm and was broken into six sections dealing with a range of different themes:

- Theme 1- 'What impact does the lack of youth facilities have on young people?'
- Theme 2- 'What impact does the lack of rural transport have on young people?'
- Theme 3- 'What impact do the feelings of personal or community safety have on young people?'
- Theme 4- 'What do you think is meant by Culture and Identity? What impact do you think feelings of personal, cultural or community identity have on young people?'

Theme 5- 'What other issues do you think affect young people from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities? What impact do these issues have on young people?'

Theme 6- 'Recommendations for a Convention'

An individual worksheet was provided for each theme and the participants were asked to indicate their age, gender and their own personal comments on the perceived impact of each theme and then what they would like to see happening under each theme. A section within the worksheet was also dedicated to relations with other communities.

For clarity, each of the six themes will be discussed in turn.

Theme 1- 'What impact does the lack of transport have on young people?'

Within this theme, there was an overwhelming sense of young people feeling isolated, alienated and not being part of or belonging to the community. The participants felt that the lack of youth facilities resulted in them 'hanging around on the streets,' getting bored and participating in 'underage drinking' because there was little else for them to do and nowhere to go. The range of options open to young people is very limited. Consequently, participants felt that this meant they were sometimes wrongly labelled as 'troublemakers', 'vandals' or 'hooligans.' They felt no sense of being 'citizens' in their own community and felt undermined by adults, by the police and others within the community. This sense of being a 'non-citizen' can become problematic to the long term sustainability of a community, if young people have no facilities, feel they no worth and no voice then they will inevitably move, when the opportunity arises, to live somewhere else where they feel valued and can have a voice.

In order to turn the situation around and ensure that young people feel part of their community, it was stated that more social and recreational facilities are required and in conjunction with this, more dedicated youth officers to work directly with young people. This would allow for dialogue to be pursued by young people within and eventually between communities. From the responses, it could be argued that the young people appear quite willing and able to shape the sort of single identity work they feel they need to build confidence in their culture and identity, a prerequisite for meaningful cross-community interaction.

Young people are clearly capable of articulating the means by which they might encourage a sense of ownership and 'citizenship' within their own community, but they feel that there is an indifference bordering on hostility to their particular needs.

When a community does not provide safe and welcoming facilities for its young people, (many of the participants stated that they felt unsafe socialising in Armagh), the young people will look to create social networks elsewhere. This will consequently contribute to a reduced level of identification with mid South Armagh, making it easier for the younger generation of Protestants to leave the area altogether.

Finally, while the type of facilities that would attract young people was not discussed in great depth, interest was expressed in the creation and use of cross community, neutral facilities, with the caveat that to be a success, the facility needed to be reasonably priced, be safe and have accessible transport.

Theme 2- 'What impact does the lack of public transport have on young people'

Discussion around this theme seemed to prompt the most debate and highlighted that the lack of public transport within rural areas reinforces the feelings of fear, alienation, isolation and cultural estrangement that many of the participants felt. Not only is there consensus that the frequency of buses, especially at peak times and at weekends is poor, but the cost of public transport is quite high, consequently young people are reluctant to use it, which results in an over reliance on parents to provide a 'taxi service' and reinforces the fear that without the parents, young people would not get to go out and socialise with their friends.

There are links being clearly demonstrated between social mobility, social isolation and community cohesion, which are at the heart of sustainable communities. A successful public transport network is a necessity, not a luxury to the sustainability of young people in rural communities in the long term.

In terms of the bus depot, whether perception or reality, the participants stated in addition to the feelings of fear, isolation and alienation, that they 'felt intimidated' when using the depot as it is in a Roman Catholic area and they felt unwelcome. Moreover, it was stated that standing at specific bus stops wearing a particular school uniform identifies you as one religion or the other, consequently if you are identified as being Protestant because of your school uniform there are feelings of fear and insecurity, as some of the buses are stoned when passing through Roman Catholic areas. Indeed, because school uniforms belonging to, what are perceived to be Protestant schools are visible, the feelings of fear and insecurity therefore derive from real experience in that a school uniform is cause enough to be attacked.

In a context of religious conflict it is easy to understand the problems associated with the displaying of 'symbols' such as uniforms. However, being able to bring

up your children safely and to be in a position to send your children to school in safety is a prime consideration for young couples in choosing where to live.

Despite these difficulties, in terms of solutions to the identified problems, the young people proposed a number of rational and pragmatic measures that could be taken. For example, tinting the windows on all buses would mean it would be difficult to tell if you were from a Protestant or a Roman Catholic background. Tinting the windows on buses, whilst only a short term solution to what is a long term problem, could help to reduce the number of people being injured or buses damaged as a result of being stoned. For the general public and in particular the participants it would also increase their feeling of safety and security.

Other solutions presented included having the bus station and some bus stops in neutral areas and reduced, if not free public transport for all young people, irrespective of how close to the city they live. Finally, it was suggested that the bus routes be changed more regularly as this would make young people feel safer, whilst at the same time, potentially reduce the number of attacks on buses.

Theme 3- 'What impact do the feelings of personal or community safety have on young people?'

To begin the discussion within this theme, all participants were asked firstly to answer the following question. 'Do you feel safe socialising in Armagh?' The participants then had to answer either yes, no or sometimes. The findings are noted below:

Do you feel safe socialising in Armagh?	YES	NO	SOMETIMES	NOT ANSWERED
Overall	0%	7.7%	76.9%	15.4%
Female	0%	7.7%	69.2%	0%
Male	0%	0%	7.7%	15.4%

These alarming statistics indicate that the majority of the respondents only 'sometimes' felt safe socialising in Armagh and that this was as a result of a number of reasons, one of which was because of the lack of social facilities and the other because of inadequate transportation from the 'country' into the 'city' in particular at the weekends.

In trying to analyse why such a large number of participants felt unsafe socialising in Armagh, 84.6% identified clothing as playing a major role in feelings of community safety. School uniforms were one example, as was football tops, which identified you as Protestant or Roman Catholic. A Gaelic shirt automatically identifies you as Roman Catholic while a Rangers shirt automatically identifies you as Protestant.

This heightens the sense of fear and alienation that many of the participants felt. Policing and issues surrounding the use of Police were also highlighted within this theme as '*increasing*' intimidation and fear rather than '*reducing*' it. One

Police Officer in particular is mentioned by 38.4% of the respondents as being over zealous and 'heavy handed' in dealing with young people.

However, despite the fears about socialising within the city and personal and community safety in general, there is a sense that through meaningful communication and dialogue that change can be made. There does seem to be a desire for increased contact and communication with 'other' communities and a better relationship with the Police. Indeed the participants identified that increased respect for one another, for Police and in turn from Police and from those from a different community background would mean that everyone could walk around all parts of the city, wearing what they wanted, free from threat and intimidation.

Other suggestions proposed by the respondents to increase the feelings of personal safety included, an increase in C.C.T.V around the city, personal safety classes, (possibly run by the Police), personal attack alarms and increased police security patrols.

Theme 4- 'What do you think is meant by Culture and Identity? What impact do you think feelings of personal, cultural or community identity have on young people?'

Within this theme, not only was the above question examined, but in addition, the question was asked, what do we do to promote Protestant Culture?

All participants identified the Protestant culture with bands, band parades, or bonfires, these in effect are the traditional 'identity markers' of the Protestant community as understood by 'others' especially the Nationalist community. Some participants also identified religion and flags as a means of promoting Protestant Culture. However, for everyone, the band parades and band culture gave them the opportunity to meet other people from a Protestant background and some felt it allowed you to not only learn more about your own identity, but provided you with the chance to celebrate and be proud of the Protestant culture.

In analysing the respondents' answers in relation to the impact feelings of personal, cultural or community identity have on young people, the replies were very mixed. 92.3% of respondents felt that bands and band parades, especially during the summer, provided an opportunity to mix with other Protestants and celebrate the Protestant culture, however, 23% also felt that bands and parades led to increased inter and intra community tension and conflict, demonstrating the complexity of cultural and political identity in Northern Ireland.

Encouragingly 15.3% of respondents felt that as a society, we have become too focussed on looking at the differences in terms of culture, that we rarely see each others similarities. Indeed, as one respondent stated in terms of identity,

“we are mostly the same and have things in common...(our) different culture makes us think we have different identities...”

The positive note in this quote is carried through all the responses. Indeed, there was a real sense from all the respondents that changes, however small and seemingly insignificant, could be made within the area of bands and parades. It was felt that if the Protestant and conversely the Roman Catholic culture was explained and myths dispelled then bands and parades could once again be something that could be enjoyed by everyone. More importantly however, there would be an increased sense of understanding and perhaps even acceptance of one another's traditions which would allow people to do 'more things to mix with the same and other cultures' and to 'interact in what we enjoy.'

In order to achieve this shared understanding, and ultimately 'shared future' 61.5% of the respondents wished that Protestant Culture and Ulster Scots Heritage be addressed and taught in schools and that the perceived imbalance in equality and access to provision be addressed as there was a fear among the respondents that the Protestant community is being left behind.

The respondents felt that in order to address this imbalance, more funding needed to be directed by Government into disadvantaged 'Protestant Communities' whilst at the same time have the Government recognise and acknowledge that financial assistance alone will not solve the problems being experienced within PUL communities. Only through open and honest dialogue can problems and issues of concern within Protestantism be redressed.

However, identifying and addressing the root causes and symptoms of these problems will be difficult, especially as in areas of weak infrastructure, which is often the case with isolated and alienated Protestant communities, there is a lack of knowledge and skills in relation to community development, which impacts on the competence of the community to take advantage of resources, both financial and non financial which may flow from EU funding or from central or local government.

The fear among the respondents that the Protestant culture is being repressed by Roman Catholics and Government for example led them to write that they wanted the freedom and security to express their culture without the fear of threat, intimidation or reprisal. Of particular note was the arson attacks on some Orange Halls within areas that the participants came from (eg Mullintur Orange Hall) and the perception that not only have the Police Service done little to investigate the matter, but are perceived to allow such attacks and intimidation against Protestants to continue.

This perception reinforces the respondents' feelings that their cultural identity and cultural symbols are both declining and being unprotected. Feelings of decreasing cultural identity often enhance the importance of minor markers of identity such as symbols and rituals, the 'attacks' on cultural traditions only underscores feelings of estrangement and isolation that the young people feel in other areas of their lives.

In terms of leadership and responsibilities, there is recognition of the role Politicians play in improving the difficulties faced by people living in rural areas and indeed P/U/L areas. Equally however, there is frustration at the fact the while DUP have campaigned to reduce rates for Orange Halls, resources both financial and non financial for other Protestant based organisations is also required, that is, "money (is required) for Protestant based groups that work for everyone."

Finally, one participant placed much emphasis on the role of the media and what they felt is the sometimes biased reports that are televised, broadcasted or written about with regard to Protestant culture and identity. This participant stated that not only is this detrimental in terms of public relations within the Protestant community, but also externally in terms of the Roman Catholic and the international community. Such irresponsible journalism, in the eyes of this participant, only serves to increase tensions throughout Northern Ireland and paint an unflattering picture of the country.

Theme Five: 'What other issues do you think affect young people from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist communities? What impact do these issues have on young people?'

Discussion within this theme seemed to prompt very emotive responses on a variety of issues and to an extent recaptured some of the previous discussions. Within this theme issues such as policing, parades, fractionalism among Protestants, decommissioning, concessions, sectarianism and alienation were all words used by the respondents to explain the types of issues facing them.

For some of the participants there was a feeling that because you are from a rural area you are discriminated against by those from the 'town' who think everyone from a rural area is a farmer.

For others, (61.5%) the issue of sectarianism is becoming more prevalent as it is perceived to be reinforced not only within the community as "Catholics get away with more than Protestants" but also the education system. This may be because educational underachievement within Protestant areas is being extensively debated within the political arena. However, to some extent this mirrors the views expressed by Protestant people in a study in Londonderry/Derry who believed that educational opportunities and outcomes were better for Roman Catholics and subsequently, emerging employment opportunities favoured Roman Catholics. Moreover, 70% of respondents in Londonderry /Derry believed that their community was unfairly treated by the PSNI.

In respect of policing and decommissioning 53.8% of the participants felt that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is becoming a nationalist Police Force and not only does it now need more Protestants, but that the 50/50 rule should be abandoned. In terms of decommissioning, the participants felt that without proof of it having happened, why should they believe it? These attitudes imply that we are not yet living in a post conflict society, given the impact of the conflict upon

this area in Armagh it should not be surprising that there is a 'hangover' of victimhood, alienation and exclusion and these are playing a part in conditioning the contemporary attitudes of young people in that area.

Finally, for some respondents (38.5%) concerns about the Parades Commission and the ruling of some parades as being illegal has only served to divide an already divided Protestant community.

For other respondents, (46.2%) there was simply a sense of frustration with the Government about the political and decision making processes within Northern Ireland "The Government from the Republic won't let vigilante Republicans sit in Government...(so)...why should we?" At the same time however, there was a recognition that in order to move forward, unpalatable decisions have to be made, and that whilst many would "like to see Sinn Fein kept out of the Northern Ireland Government"...the "SDLP...(should be)...kept in Government...but that the UUP and DUP need to become more united."

This mirrors the views of Protestants in Londonderry/ Derry who feel that 'Important ideological differences exist between the SDLP and Sinn Fein, the former being regarded as a political party and more easily negotiated with than Sinn Fein'.

Theme 6- 'Recommendations for a Convention'

The final theme of the day summarised the main issues under each of the 5 previous themes and dealt with the recommendations that participants wanted to be brought before a wider Convention. For clarity, each theme and the recommendations made will be dealt with in turn.

Theme One- Lack of Facilities

1. Council facilities made more accessible and in neutral venues
2. Free transport to youth facilities for rural young people
3. More funding for youth facilities and youth development workers

Theme Two- Transport

1. Reduced, if not free bus passes for students, irrespective of the distance you live from school
2. A more youth friendly bus service
3. Tinted windows for security for all passengers
4. Weekend and late night bus services to increase mobility and inclusion

Theme Three- Community Safety

1. Improved lighting in rural and urban areas to improve community safety
2. More policing in rural and urban areas to improve community safety
3. Increased awareness of other cultures to enhance cross co-operation and understanding
4. Training and development to reduce sectarianism
5. A more youth friendly Police Service
6. Designated youth areas to reduce the fear of being attacked

Theme Four- Culture and Identity

1. Increased funding for Orange Halls to increase their use as community facilities
2. Increased funding for other Protestant organisations that are not linked to the 'Orange'
3. Culture and single identity training for young people about Protestantism and Protestant culture
4. Acknowledgement, understanding and respect from others of the Protestant culture
5. Greater acknowledgement, teaching and understanding of Ulster Scots in schools and a parity of esteem in relation to other cultures
6. Political and cultural awareness to be highlighted and explained in schools to increase awareness and understanding

Theme Five- Other Issues

1. Perceptions of policing inequalities (50/50 rule) redressed
2. More information on Government Polices and how the Police and Parades Commission operate should be disseminated and made 'reader friendly'
3. Alleviate the feelings of isolation and alienation by improving rural transport and youth facilities, teaching about culture and cultural differences and managing family conflict
4. The feelings of anger and hurt to be addressed and people given the help they need to try and move on and to possibly allow for some cross community work to be carried out
5. Close the gap between rural and city areas

Conclusion

The themes discussed throughout the focus group promoted some very emotive responses, both positive and negative by the participants. Terminology such as 'rebel', 'hatred', 'brutality', 'isolation', 'alienation' and 'intimidation' were all used as responses to the questions asked.

That said however, what has been encouraging to read is the genuine desire not only to learn about and understand more the Protestant identity and culture, but also the Roman Catholic and Nationalist culture and identity to allow experiences to be shared, and understanding, respect and friendships to be fostered, in the words of one participant, "interact in what we enjoy."

This focus group and the issues raised by the participants offers an opportunity for more detailed work to be carried out by the council, statutory and Government agencies and voluntary and community organisations to improve services and facilities currently available to people, both young and old living in urban and rural Armagh. By working in partnership to improve, public transport, create a safe and welcoming space to socialise and carrying out both single identity and cross community work, the City could become a more vibrant and inviting place for its young people.